Lessons For All:

Factors Contributing to Early School Leaving in the Northwest Territories
Volume I – Community Report

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LESSONS FOR ALL: FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING IN THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

VOLUME 1: COMMUNITY REPORT

Volume 1: Community Report

Volume 2: Summary Report

Volume 3: Technical Report

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CONTENTS

PART ONE
THE RESEARCH PROJECT: OVERVIEW & CONTEXT 5

SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS - THE MAIN FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING IN THE NWT 6

INTRODUCTION 7

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE AND SCOPE 7

METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS 8

BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH PROJECT 9
- Schooling in the NWT 9
- Early School Leaving in the NWT 9
- The Socio-Economic Context 9
- What is Known About Early School Leaving? 10

PART TWO
THE FINDINGS: FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING IN THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES 11

COMMUNITY FACTORS 12
- Opinion About NWT Communities 12
- Community Attitudes About and Expectations of Education 13
- Roles and Responsibilities for Education 13
- Community Support for and Participation in Schooling 14

HOME FACTORS 15
- Attitudes in the Home About Education 15
- People in the Home 16
- Economic Circumstances 17
- Students' Household Responsibilities and Their Employment 17
- Decision Making and Rules in the Home 18
- Family Problems 19

SCHOOL FACTORS 20
- Student Attitudes About School 20
- The Age and Grade of Students 21
- School Instructional Program 22
- Teaching Styles and Methods 22
- Academic Performance 22
- Attendance 23
- Making and Breaking School Rules 23
- Student Support 24
- School-Home-Community Relations 24
- School Sponsored Extracurricular Activities 24

FACTORS IN THE PERSONAL LIVES OF STUDENTS 25
- Student Attitudes About School and Expectations for the Future 25
- Self Esteem 26
- Peer Relationships 26
- Leisure Time 27
- Use of Alcohol, Drugs and Solvents 27
- Suicide 28

THE OPINIONS OF HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES 29

SUMMARY 30

STEERING COMMITTEE 31

THE RESEARCH TEAM 32

BIBLIOGRAPHY 33

TABLES AND CHARTS

Table 1: Characteristics of Students Interviewed 8

Table 2: Factors Thought to Contribute to Students Leaving School Early as Drawn from North American Research 10

Fig. 1: Students' Perceptions About the Importance of Finishing High School 13

Fig. 2: Students' Perceptions About Adult Attitudes Toward Education (by Percentage) 15

Fig. 3: Students' Relationship to Other People in the Home (by Percentage of Students) 16

Fig. 4: Number of People Living in the Students' Household (by Percentage of Students) 16

Fig. 5: Students' Opinion About the Availability of a Quiet Area in Their Household (Percentage by Cultural Background) 16

Fig. 6: Number of Households Students Have Lived in Since They Were 10 Years Old (by Percentage of Students Who Have Lived in Different Households). 16

Fig. 7: Households Receiving Social Assistance (by Percentage of Students) 17

Fig. 8: Availability of Food in the Students' Household (by Percentage of Students) 17

Fig. 9: Current Work Activities Among Students No Longer in School (by Percentage) 17

Fig. 10: Responsibility for Setting Rules and Making Decisions in the Household (by Percentage of Students) 18

Fig. 11: Decisions Made in the Household in the Past Year About School (Percentage of Students by Cultural Background) 18

Fig. 12: Punishment or Penalty Expected if the Student Breaks the Household Rules (by Percentage of Students) 18

Fig. 13: Students' Impressions of the Kind of Home They Live In (by Percentage) 19

Fig. 14: Factors in the Home Seen by Students to Have a Negative Affect on Their Schooling (by Percentage) 19

Fig. 15: Students At Risk of Leaving School Early Who Have Considered Quitting (by Percentage and Cultural Background) 20

Fig. 16: The Main Reasons Students Who Are No Longer in School Give for Quitting (by Percentage) 21

Table 3: Most Frequently Cited Problems Students Have Experienced at School in the Past Year by Cultural Background and Percentage of Students ... 21

Fig. 17: Self-Reported Age and Last Grade/Class Completed (by Percentage of Students) 21

Fig. 18: How Students' Time Was Spent at School in the Past Year (Percentage of Students by Grade) 22

Fig. 19: Days of School Missed in an Average Week as Reported by Students (by Percentage) 23

Fig. 20: Students' View of What Adults Do When Students Miss School (by Percentage) 23

Fig. 21: Reasons Why Students Miss School (by Percentage of Students) 23

Table 4: What Students Don't Like About School by Percentage of Students and Age Group 24

Fig. 22: Students' Perception of Adult and/or Parental Contact with the School in the Past Year (by Percentage) 24

Fig. 23 : How Students Would Describe Themselves to Others (by Percentage) 26

Fig. 24: How Students Mostly See Themselves (by Percentage) 26

Fig. 25: How Students Think Most of Their Friends and People Their Own Age See Them (by Percentage) 26

Fig. 26: Impact on Students of Friends Who Are Out of School (by Percentage) 27

Fig. 27: Non-Use of Alcohol, Drugs and Solvents (by Percentage of Students) 27

Fig. 28: Students' Experience with Suicide (by Percentage) 28

Table 5: Comparison of the Opinions of NWT Early School Leavers/Students at Risk of Leaving School Early and High School Graduates 29

Table 6: Key Factors Contributing to Early School Leaving in the NWT 30

PART ONE
THE RESEARCH PROJECT: OVERVIEW & CONTEXT

SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS - THE MAIN FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING IN THE NWT

It is evident from the research findings that the profile of the early school leaver involves a complex set of relationships which touch the community, home, school and personal lives of students in the NWT.

All factors in the following summary have been identified by NWT students except those preceded by "Community Members".

Early School Leaving

School Factors

The Student...

- Has Low Home/School Contact
- Experiences Problems with School Work, Teachers & School Rules
- Has Likely Failed a Grade(s)
- Spends Most of School Time Working at Desk or Listening to Teachers Rather than Working Co-operatively/Interacting with Other Students
- Fades Out of School Rather than Quits
- Has Poor School Attendance

Home Factors

The Student...

- Has Poor Economic Circumstances
- Lives in an Average or Larger than Average Sized Household
- Is Required to Work at Home
- Considers Wage Employment Important/Necessary
- Doesn't Participate in Household Decisions
- Expects No Discipline at Home
- Lives in a Troubled Home
- Has Low Home/School Contact

Personal Factors

The Student...

- Uses Alcohol
- Has Been Exposed to Suicide
- Has Unrealistic Expectations for the Future
- Is Clear About the Value and Purpose of Education
- Has Strong / Influential Peer Relationships

Community Factors

The Student...

- Is Uncertain About the Quality of Community Life
- Is Uncertain About the Future in His/Her Community

Community Members...

- Are Dissatisfied with Control of Education
- Are Concerned About Lack of Community Support for Education
- Are Unclear About the Value and Purpose of Education

INTRODUCTION

This document summarizes the findings of a community-based research project to learn about the factors which contribute to NWT students leaving school before graduating from Grade 12. A more detailed description of the project and the results are available in Volume 2: Summary Report and Volume 3: Technical Report. These reports are available from the GNWT Department of Education or the Canada Employment and Immigration Commission (CEIC), NWT Directorate, both in Yellowknife, NWT.

The research findings are important to parents, educators, governments, and community organizations because:

- There is an absence of research and baseline information on early school leaving in the Northwest Territories. Therefore, it has not been possible to fully understand the true nature of the problem or to monitor how it is changing. This research project provides baseline data for these purposes.
- The findings of studies conducted in Canada and elsewhere about students who leave school early have generally been applied to the NWT. This research project will enable educators, governments, parents and the students themselves to confirm or refute the appropriateness of these studies to the NWT.
- The Department of Education, Boards and Divisional Boards of Education, communities, schools and/or parents have initiatives underway to address the problem of students leaving school early. This research project will enable some assessment of the appropriateness of these initiatives, and enable these partners in education to make changes which will support and encourage students to stay in school longer.
- For the past two years CEIC has provided Stay in School funding to Boards and Divisional Boards of Education and community organizations to encourage students to stay in school. The results of this research project will enable CEIC and the partners in education to identify projects that should be funded to support NWT youth staying in school.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE AND SCOPE

The objective of the research project was *to improve the understanding of factors contributing to early school leaving in the NWT.* It is hoped that the various partners in the education process will be able to analyse their own situation and apply the findings of this research to their responsibilities for the education of young people in the NWT.

The project is the first of its kind to be undertaken in the NWT to:

- document the opinion and background of students across the NWT who may be at risk of leaving school early and who have left school early,
- review school records maintained on students at risk of leaving school early and early school leavers,
- stage community forums to collect the views of local education authorities and the public on factors contributing to early school leaving,
- involve each NWT board and divisional board of education in a research project on early school leaving,
- train community residents across the NWT to conduct research into early school leaving, and
- jointly involve the Federal Government, the GNWT Department of Education, and regional and community education authorities in identifying the factors contributing to early school leaving in the NWT.

A Steering Committee made up of two representatives from the Canada Employment and Immigration Commission (CEIC), two representatives from the GNWT Department of Education, and two representatives from Lutra Associates Ltd., Yellowknife guided the research project. The Steering Committee identified the research objective and principles; reviewed progress and provided input into the research plan; and gave direction for reporting the research results. Lutra Associates Ltd. was responsible for developing and implementing the various components of the research project.

The scope established for the research project is summarized below:

Output:

- The output of the research would be an NWT profile of factors contributing to early school leaving. While the profile would recognize differences which may exist across the Territories, the focus would be on similarities.
- The project would be a pilot study and the methodology would be carefully documented to enable further research, if warranted.
- As a community-based research project, the report would offer a Territorial-community perspective rather than an academic treatise on early school leaving in the Northwest Territories.

Process:

- Literature on early school leaving would be reviewed to provide definition and structure to the research plan for the NWT project.

- The schools and communities invited to participate in the research would be typical of those represented by each board or divisional board of education in terms of school enrolment, attendance and drop-out rates, and grades available. Participating schools would be located in communities with cultural and economic circumstances typical of the region.
- Schools and communities selected to participate in the project would be approved by the board or divisional board of education and the local education authority.
- Students at risk of leaving school early and those who have recently left the system would be the primary information source.
- The Territorial definition of an early school leaver is any student who leaves school and does not return by the next school year, without meeting graduation requirements. There is no single definition of a student at risk of leaving school early. As such, it would be necessary for each school participating in the research to articulate the definition used to identify those students-at-risk who would be eligible to participate in the research project.
- To improve the quality of participation in the research project, resident researchers would be hired in each participating community. Community-based researchers would participate in two training sessions designed to develop familiarity with the subject matter and specific research skills.

METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

The research was conducted by a 15 member community-based research team, managed by Lutra Associates Ltd. The field work was conducted between March and June 1991. The project collected information in order of priority, from:

- 198 in-depth interviews with a cross-section of students between the ages of 11-19 years living in 10 NWT communities and attending 12 NWT schools, who were identified as being at risk of leaving school early and who had left school in the previous 12 months;
- a thorough review of 192 files (Cumulative Files) maintained by schools, on those students interviewed (Six files were unavailable because they had been lost, had not been transferred with the student, or were retained by the school last attended by the student.);
- focus group meetings with 10 of the 12 local education authorities involved in the project (Two local education authorities were unable to schedule time to input into the research.);
- public forums and one to one interviews in each of the 10 NWT communities participating in the project; and
- a review of research on early school leaving conducted in Canada and elsewhere.

Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the students who participated in the project.

Table 1: Characteristics of Students Interviewed

	Students in School	Students Out of School
TOTAL	140	58
SEX		
Male	81	27
Female	59	31
AGE		
11	1	-
12-14	55	8
15-16	54	18
17-18	30	29
19+	-	3
CULTURAL BACKGROUND		
Aboriginal	114	50
Non-Aboriginal	26	8

As the first of its kind in the NWT, this research project has limitations. The lack of a Territorial-wide definition of a student at risk of leaving school early meant that students identified by their schools as possible participants in the research, were eligible for many different reasons. The only characteristic all had in common was poor school attendance. Since no common set of characteristics was used to identify students, there is no way of confirming if the students participating in this project are typical of NWT students at risk of leaving school early.

The structure and/or the wording of the student questionnaire was poor in five areas. This resulted in weak or incomplete data on: 1) leaving home to attend school outside the community, 2) student residences/boarding homes, 3) teen pregnancy, 4) education levels of parents/guardians, and 5) changes in student attitudes about school.

As a comprehensive review of NWT school student records had not previously been undertaken, the quality and consistency of information contained in Cumulative Files was unknown. In fact, the type, nature and extent of information contained in CUM Files varied considerably across the NWT and within individual schools. Due to the wide variability of CUM File data and the difficulties this posed to collection, compilation and interpretation, CUM File data must be used with caution.

The extensive nature and success of student interviews, and the cross-section of students participating in the research provided good baseline data even though the number of participants was small (198 students out of a school population of 6,748 students 11 or more years of age, or 3%).

BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Schooling in the NWT

In 1982 the NWT Legislative Assembly's Special Committee on Education recommended changes to make the education system more responsive to the varied needs of NWT communities, and to enable local people to participate in and have control over education in their communities. As a result of the Special Committee's report (entitled *Learning, Tradition and Change*):

- the philosophy of shared responsibility for education in the NWT (*Education in the N.W.T* , 1989) was developed. It states that together, students, parents and the community will promote the skills, abilities and attitudes each student needs to be a responsible and confident member of this rapidly changing, multicultural society.
- the framework for education in the NWT (*Our Students, Our Future: An Educational Framework*, 1991) was prepared to promote schooling which incorporates and reflects the child's cultural identity and endorses more control of education at the local level.
- curriculum materials pertinent to the languages and cultures of the NWT are used in NWT schools.
- more teachers are being trained and certified in the NWT and teach in NWT schools.
- the School-Community Counsellor program was put in place to strengthen relationships among the school, community, and students.
- 11 NWT Boards and Divisional Boards of Education together with Community Education Councils are responsible for the operations of NWT schools.

Still, the relative newness of and the lack of familiarity with formal education and the constantly changing world of the late 20th century, pose continuous challenges to all aspects of the learning environment. For these reasons, involving all of the partners in the education process - the students, parents, educators, and other community members is a basic principle underlying all education initiatives in the NWT today.

Early School Leaving in the NWT

Statistics maintained by the GNWT Department of Education provide an overview of the NWT student population. These data indicate that:

- Over the past five years, the proportional enrolment rate in the primary grades (K-Grade 6) has declined but in the junior and senior high grades (Grade 7-12) it has increased. This indicates that more NWT students are staying in school longer.
- Each year 4% to 5% of the students enrolled in NWT schools withdraw. This means that 700-800 students leave the NWT school system each year before graduating from Grade 12.
- The high school graduation rate for the Northwest Territories is consistently reported at 20%. This compares to a Canadian graduation rate of 70%. (The graduation rate is defined as the number of annual Grade 12 graduates as a percentage of the 18 year old population.)
- School attendance is improving. While there are good attenders and poor attenders, NWT students attend school an average of 85% of the time, compared to 82% in 1985/86. Truant days account for a significant portion of non-attendance at Northwest Territories schools.

The Socio-Economic Context

Early school leaving directly and indirectly impacts the socio-economic well-being of the Northwest Territories. A glance at some of the NWT's characteristics illustrates this.

- The NWT population estimated at 54,800 (GNWT, 1990), is spread over 61 communities of which two-thirds have fewer than 600 residents (GNWT,1990).
- Per capita income in large centres such as Yellowknife and Hay River is almost two-thirds higher than in small communities such as Rae Lakes and Repulse Bay (GNWT, 1990).
- The average monthly social assistance caseload has grown by about 50% over the past five years (GNWT, 1990).
- Almost two-thirds of the people employed in the NWT today were born outside of the Territories (GNWT,1990).
- The rate of unemployment varies widely from, for example, 4% in Yellowknife and 14% in Iqaluit to 34% in Clyde River and 24% in Nahanni Butte (GNWT, 1989).

- The NWT is a complex and often conflicting socio-cultural environment where seven aboriginal languages and almost as many indigenous cultures interface with a host of other languages and cultures.
- Even though aboriginal people make up 58% of the population and 72% of the school enrolment, only 5% of aboriginal students who start school graduate from Grade 12 (GNWT,1989).
- 45% of the working age population and 72% of the aboriginal working age population in the NWT is functionally illiterate (i.e. report having achieved Grade 9 or less) (GNWT,1989).
- Among people unemployed in the NWT, 67% have Grade 9 or less (GNWT,1990).
- The NWT has one of the highest rates of suicide in Canada (GNWT,1990).
- Reports of family violence and other violent crime are on the increase in the NWT (GNWT,1989).
- Alcohol, drug and solvent abuse are seen as major problems for people of all ages in the NWT (GNWT,1989).

What is Known About Early School Leaving?

While this is the first research into early school leaving in the NWT, studies elsewhere provide a general understanding of the subject. Recent research into early school leaving in North America indicates that there is a growing consensus in at least the following three areas:

- There is no typical early school leaver and therefore, no one definition of an early school leaver.
- Leaving school early is a process rather than an event.
- More and more research on the subject is focusing on the interplay between school structure, and personal, social and family issues and characteristics.

Some of the factors that other research has found to contribute to early school leaving are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Factors Thought to Contribute to Students Leaving School Early as Drawn from North American Research

FAMILY/SOCIETAL FACTORS

- Δ poverty
- Δ member of a "minority culture" [1]
- Δ family breakdown
- Δ child abuse, including neglect
- Δ family problems (eg. alcohol)
- Δ lack of "educational resources" at home
- Δ low value placed on schooling (in the home)
- Δ uncertainty about the benefits and rewards of education
- Δ low parental involvement (in their child's education)

SCHOOL FACTORS (School Policies and Practices)

- Δ uninviting school climate
- Δ lack of appropriate course offerings
- Δ inappropriate instructional materials
- Δ school policy on grade retention
- Δ inappropriate teaching styles
- Δ emphasis on rote learning
- Δ lack of adequate counselling services
- Δ failure to identify and respond to student needs/ characteristics

PERSONAL FACTORS

- Δ low self-esteem
- Δ lack of life goals
- Δ loss of hope for the future
- Δ poor self-discipline
- Δ desire to work/make money
- Δ alcohol or other drug abuse
- Δ inability to resist negative peer pressure
- Δ repeated failure in school
- Δ alienation from other students, teachers, family and self
- Δ lack of participation in school sponsored activities

[1] The term "minority group" is often used in research on early school leaving that has been conducted in the United States. The term is used to describe students who have a different cultural background than other students in the school.

PART TWO
THE FINDINGS:
FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING IN THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

In this research project, the term "early school leaver" means any student who leaves school and does not return by the next school year, without meeting graduation requirements. A "student at risk of leaving school early" is commonly defined by NWT schools as a poor attender but a number of other characteristics may also be used to identify these students. These students are the main information source about early school leaving in the NWT. Their point of view is the focus of the following sections. All references to "students" (for example, students who have already left school, aboriginal students, students from larger centres) refer only to students who participated in the research project, not to all NWT students. The research results are reported under four main groups of factors in the community, home, school and personal lives of the students.

COMMUNITY FACTORS

The Student...

- Is Uncertain About the Quality of Community Life
- Is Uncertain About the Future in His/Her Community

Community Members...

- Are Dissatisfied with Control of Education
- Are Concerned About Lack of Community Support for Education
- Are Unclear About the Value and Purpose of Education

This section discusses attitudes about, participation in and support for education in NWT communities.

Opinion About NWT Communities

Students at risk of leaving school early and those who have already left school are undecided about the quality of community life and about their own future in their communities. This view is shared by other community residents.

About half (51%) of the students want to be living in a different community in 10 years because they "dislike" their community and/or have a desire to live in a more interesting place. On the other hand, almost half of the students (49%) are attached to their community and believe that they will still be living in the same community in 10 years. To these students, the community represents both home and family.

Given the opportunity to make changes in their community, many students (41%) do not know what they could do or feel that there is "nothing they could do". Among those students who would seek to make changes in their community, the focus of student efforts would be:

- to increase community participation and coordination (23%) (eg. would get involved, go to meetings and encourage people to respect each other),
- to reduce the use of alcohol (17%), or
- to create more jobs/businesses (14%).

Members of every community participating in the research project expressed concern for the social-economic well-being of their community. The public and to some extent the students suggest evolving stronger, healthier communities by: creating positive role models, stimulating local involvement and control, creating jobs, con-

fronting peer and family pressures, and coming to terms with cultural and lifestyle conflicts.

Community Attitudes About and Expectations of Education

NWT students at risk of leaving school early and those who have left school place a high value on education. To them, the importance of education is in the potential to get a good job, have more choices, have a better life, or because "education (in itself) is important". These students also believe that adults value education for the same reasons. Yet community residents seem to be less clear about the value and purpose of education.

Regardless of residency in large or small communities, gender, or cultural background, most students (90%) believe that finishing high school is important and 84% say that their parents/guardians share this view (Figure 1). While students believe that adults share their strong views about the importance and value of education, not all community members agree.

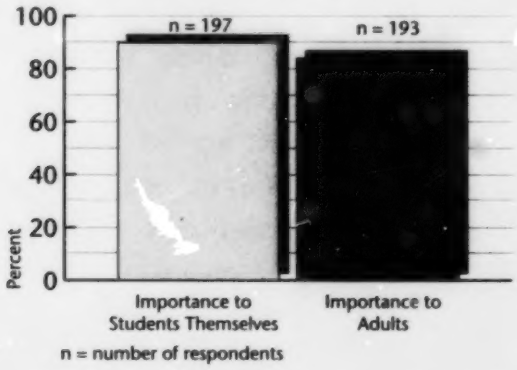


Fig. 1: Students' Perceptions About the Importance of Finishing High School

Even though the GNWT Department of Education's framework for education (*Our Students, Our Future: An Educational Framework*, 1991) endorses culture-based schooling and community/partnership involvement in education, few participants in this research project recognize the potential to combine academic and cultural/lifestyle programming to create more community appropriate instructional programs. Throughout the NWT, community members ask what education is for - does it enhance culture and lifestyle? does it lead to employment? does it make life better for the individual, the community or the society? The reasons that community residents raise these questions are:

- a strong desire to improve the quality of life of young people,
- a need to maintain the cultural integrity of aboriginal societies,
- uncertainty about the demands and expectations of a changing society, and
- poorly articulated or shared expectations in the home, and among community or cultural groups.

Community members suggest that it may be possible to reduce the current scepticism about schooling through better sharing or at least a common understanding of the different visions and expectations of education.

Roles and Responsibilities for Education

There is dissatisfaction with the extent of local input and control of the education system, or confusion and/or uncertainty about the various roles and responsibilities of the partners in the education process. (Students were not asked for this information.)

Most local education authorities see their role as trouble-shooting, problem solving, and one of handling logistical and administrative details rather than inputting into school policies, practices and the instructional program/curriculum. Discipline, attendance and parental/community liaison are three responsibilities most commonly held by local authorities. From a community perspective, education authorities often seem to be a "sounding board" for local concerns.

Public participation in the work of local education authorities is poor. Communities seem to be ill-informed about the education system, indicating that local education authorities may not be effective. Major barriers facing these bodies were identified as:

- a lack of member skills,
- limited understanding about the philosophies of and methods and approaches to education, and
- the strangeness and relative newness of formal education.

Operating guidelines, and orientation programs for local education authorities would improve the focus and effectiveness of these organizations. Further, involving the community leadership in schools and in the work of education authorities gives credibility and/or visibility to education issues and education institutions/organizations, and increases public participation and opportunities for positive changes to occur.

Reducing the average annual turn-over rate (estimated at 23%) among NWT teachers and coping with the high community expectations of teachers are issues communities must deal with. Suggestions for dealing with these issues include:

- putting strong staff support systems in place,
- adopting team approaches to education,
- orienting new teachers,
- encouraging teacher attendance at local education authority meetings,
- increasing teacher interaction with the community, and
- ensuring the ongoing professional development of teachers.

Community Support for and Participation in Schooling

Community members seem to agree that there is insufficient support for and participation in schooling.

Community efforts to support schooling seem to be weak. Most frequently, local education authority members say that communities view schools as institutions that are separate from the community and that most residents don't get involved in the school. Most local education authorities are looking for ways to strengthen linkages between the community and the school.

HOME FACTORS

The Student...

- Has Poor Economic Circumstances
- Lives in an Average or Larger than Average Sized Household
- Is Required to Work at Home
- Considers Wage Employment Important/Necessary
- Doesn't Participate in Household Decisions
- Expects No Discipline at Home
- Lives in a Troubled Home
- Has Low Home/School Contact

This section identifies the characteristics of the home environment of NWT early school leavers and students who appear to be at risk of leaving school early.

Attitudes in the Home About Education

Students at risk and those who have left school early believe that their parents/guardians have a positive attitude about their education. At least half of the community residents participating in the research disagree.

80% or more of the students believe that their parents/ guardians have positive attitudes about their education (Figure 2). At least half of the residents participating in local education authority and general public forums disagree. These residents say that factors in the home

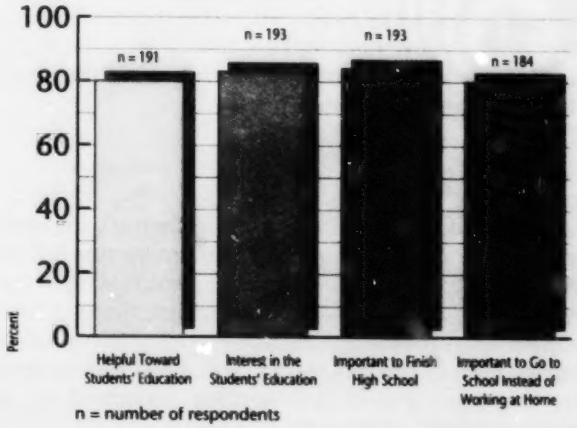


Fig. 2: Students' Perceptions About Adult Attitudes Toward Education (by Percentage)

which positively support the education of young people are absent namely structure, discipline, expectations, challenges, and responsibility. Improving parenting skills and particularly the responsibilities parents have toward their childrens' schooling, are initiatives which might bring student perceptions and community opinions closer together.

People in the Home

At risk students and those who have left school tend to: be members of traditional mother and father families, live in average or larger than average-sized households, and live in the same household now as the one they grew up in.

More than half of the students (58%) participating in this research project live with their mother and father (Figure 3). Contrary to information provided by students, many local education authority and other community members have the view that most students at risk of leaving school early and those who have left school early, are raised by their grandparents or by only one parent.

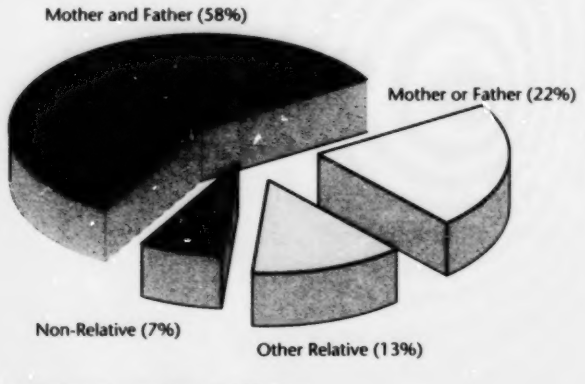


Fig. 3: Students' Relationship to Other People in the Home (by Percentage of Students)

According to Statistics Canada (1986 Census), the average number of persons in NWT households was 3.7. As shown in Figure 4, 87% of students participating in this research say they have 4 or more people living in their household and of these, 23% have 8 or more living in their homes. Even though households are large, most students say they have a quiet area in their household to do homework/study (Figure 5).

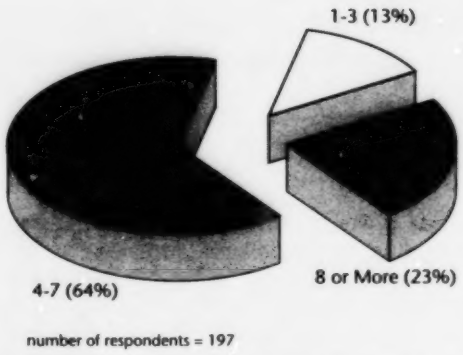


Fig. 4: Number of People Living in the Students' Household (by Percentage of Students)

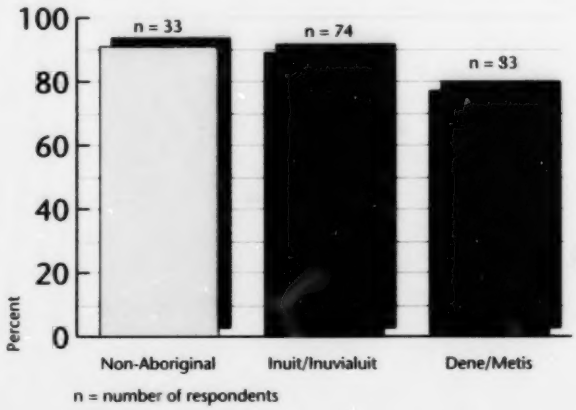


Fig. 5: Students' Opinion About the Availability of a Quiet Area in Their Household (Percentage by Cultural Background)

Most students (78%) say that they live in the same household today as the one where they grew up (Figure 6).

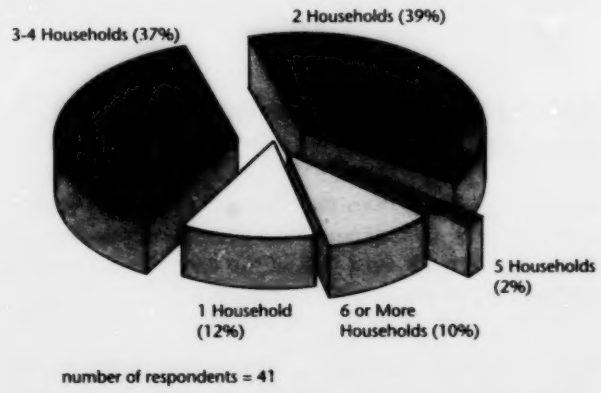


Fig. 6: Number of Households Students Have Lived in Since They Were 10 Years Old (by Percentage of Students Who Have Lived in Different Households)

Economic Circumstances

Students no longer in school and aboriginal students come from homes with poor economic circumstances as evidenced by a greater use of social assistance and more incidences of food being unavailable in the households of these students. Community members believe that economic circumstances in the home are a factor in early school leaving.

Wage employment is pursued by the parents of about two-thirds of the students. Compared to students in school, the parents of students no longer in school are more likely to be involved in resource harvesting activities, unemployed or working around the home. Slightly more than half (51%) of the students say that their households never receive social assistance (Figure 7). Less than half (43%) of the students in school say their household receives social assistance compared to 64% of the households of students who have left school. 94% of non-aboriginal students say their households never receive social assistance compared to the households of 42% of aboriginal students.

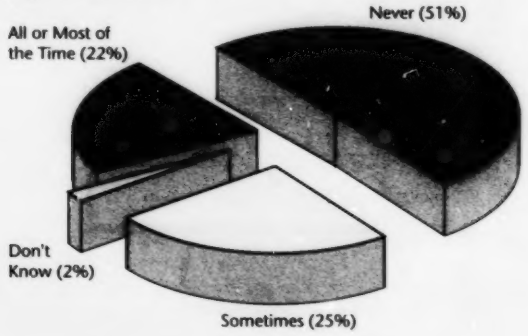


Fig. 7: Households Receiving Social Assistance (by Percentage of Students)

Most (66%) students report that their households always or sometimes have lots of food (Figure 8). A greater number of students (51%) out of school report that their household sometimes runs out of food or never seems to have enough food. This compares to 27% of households where the student is in school. Almost two-thirds (65%) of non-aboriginal students say their households always have lots of food compared to 48% of Dene/Metis and 22% of Inuit/Inuvialuit students.

The Canadian Health Attitudes and Behaviours Survey (1984) and discussions with local education authorities and school staff suggest that some young people in the NWT may not receive proper nourishment to function well in school. This could be one reason why many community members see economic circumstances in the home as a factor in early school leaving.

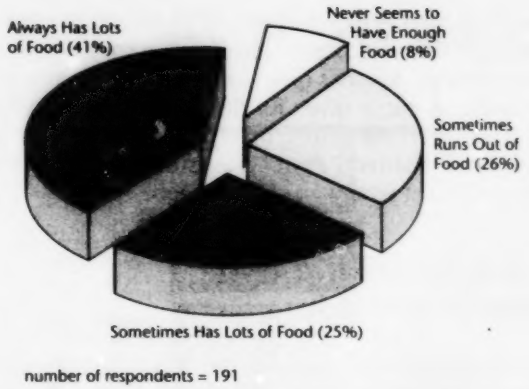

Always Has Lots of Food (41%)
Never Seems to Have Enough Food (8%)
Sometimes Runs Out of Food (26%)
Sometimes Has Lots of Food (25%)
number of respondents = 191

Fig. 8: Availability of Food in the Students' Household (by Percentage of Students)

Students' Household Responsibilities and Their Employment

Work responsibilities at home and wage employment were reasons that almost half (47%) of the early school leavers quit school. Over one-third of those students who left school early had full-time jobs.

Most students (86%) have household responsibilities and about one-fifth fulfill these responsibilities during school hours. Over three-quarters of all students interviewed prefer(ed) going to school to working at home because they "like being with friends" or "want to get an education". Of those students who are no longer in school, one-quarter say that working at home was the main reason for leaving school.

Less than one-third (32%) of the students in school have part-time jobs at which they spend an average of 11 hours during the week and 11 hours on weekends. Among students no longer in school, an almost equal number

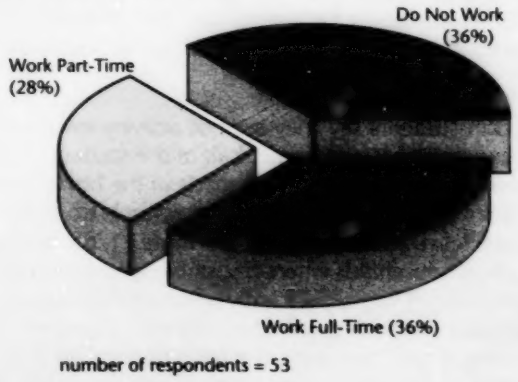


Fig. 9: Current Work Activities Among Students No Longer in School (by Percentage)

worked full-time as didn't work (Figure 9). Most of these students (85%) like(d) their job because they are/were earning money. Reasons given for disliking their jobs are very similar to those given for disliking school: "work is boring" or "don't like getting up in the morning". Slightly less than one-quarter (22%) of these students say that the reason they quit school was to get a job.

Decision Making and Rules in the Home

Students who have left school and those at risk of doing so do not participate in decision making and rule setting in the home and generally don't expect any punishment or disciplinary action if they break household rules.

Most students (72%) say that decisions and rules in the home are usually made by one or both parents (Figure 10).

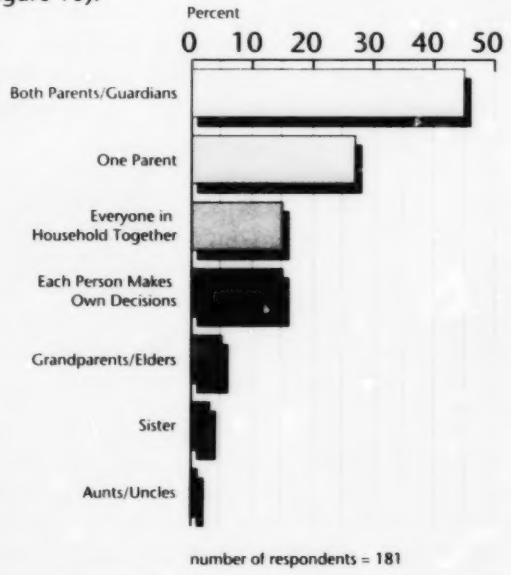


Fig. 10: Responsibility for Setting Rules and Making Decisions in the Household (by Percentage of Students)

Although students say they are not actively involved in decision making in the home, half of the students interviewed say that decisions were made in the home in the past year as to whether to attend school, go back to school or leave school. As shown in Figure 11, the number of student households where decisions were made about school does not vary significantly by cultural background. These data contradict opinions offered by community members. From comments put forth by local education authorities and other community members, there is a sense that few decisions are being made and/or few rules being set down in the home about education.

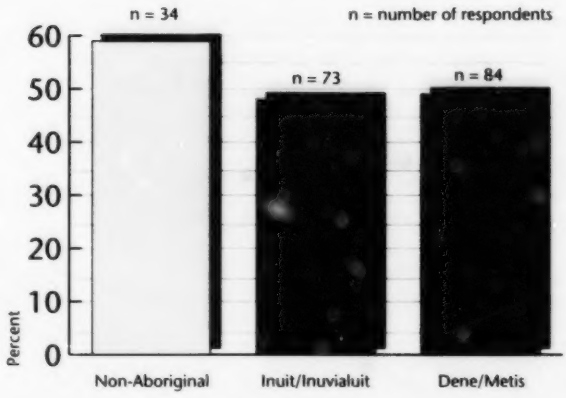


Fig. 11: Decisions Made in the Household in the Past Year About School (Percentage of Students by Cultural Background)

If students break household rules, many (46%) can expect to receive no punishment or penalty (Figure 12). Further, the punishment or penalty when rules are broken does not vary with the type of household (i.e. father and mother households react the same as households headed by a single parent).

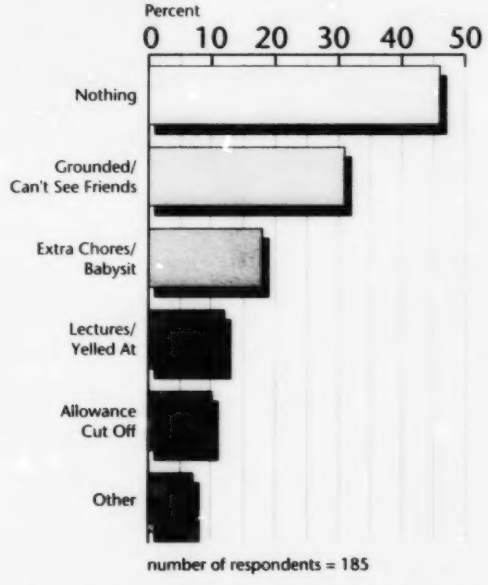


Fig. 12: Punishment or Penalty Expected if the Student Breaks the Household Rules (by Percentage of Students)

Family Problems

Students at risk of leaving school early and those who have left school seem to live in troubled homes.

The description that students offer of their home environment is contradictory in a number of ways. While most report living in happy homes (Figure 13), up to one half of the students say their schooling has been negatively affected by activities in the home (Figure 14). Substance use/abuse by the student or another household member is most frequently cited as negatively affecting schooling. In virtually every meeting with the general public and local education authorities, family problems were identified as negatively affecting young people and their schooling.

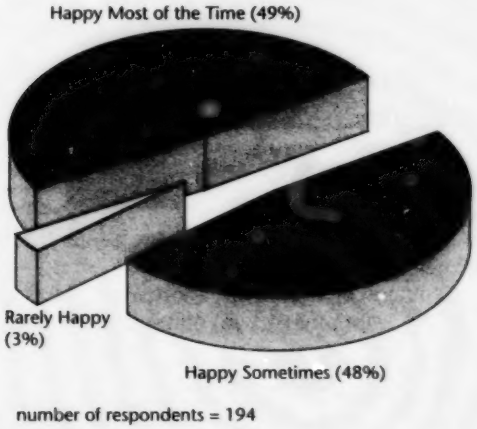


Fig. 13: Students' Impressions of the Kind of Home They Live In (by Percentage)

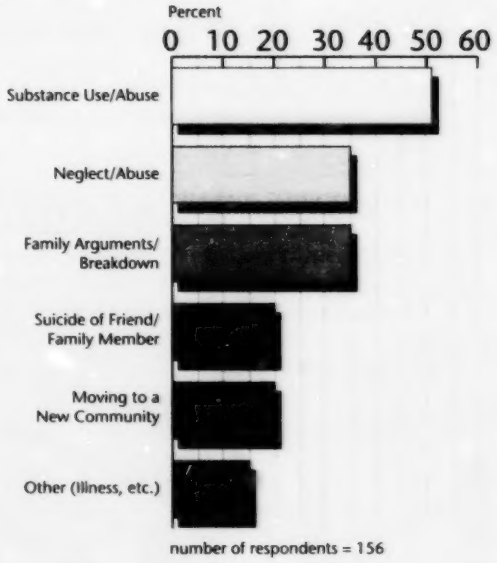


Fig. 14: Factors in the Home Seen by Students to Have a Negative Affect on Their Schooling (by Percentage)

SCHOOL FACTORS

The Student...

- Has Low Home/School Contact
- Experiences Problems with School Work, Teachers & School Rules
- Has Likely Failed a Grade(s)
- Spends Most of School Time Working at Desk or Listening to Teachers Rather than Working Co-operatively/Interacting with Other Students
- Fades Out of School Rather than Quits
- Has Poor School Attendance

This section describes the school environment and those factors in it related to early school leaving in the NWT.

Student Attitudes About School

Students at risk of leaving school early like school for social and personal reasons but consider quitting because of problems related to school work, teachers and rules. Students who have recently left school did so because of poor relationships with peers or teachers; they found school boring and/or had difficulty with school work; or they got into trouble/suspended/expelled.

Over three-quarters (76%) of the students in school say they like school but almost half (48%) have considered quitting (Figure 15). Seeing friends, learning new things/doing interesting things, and playing sports are the main reasons students like school. The reasons students con-

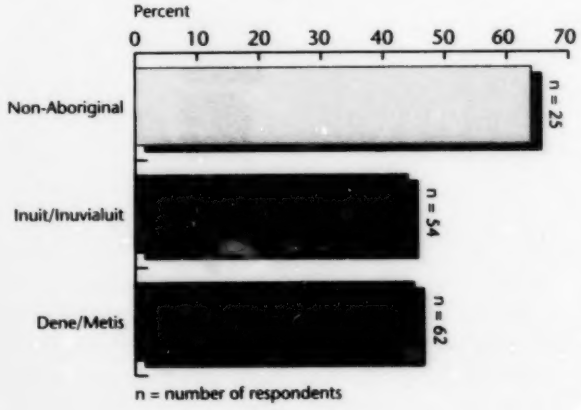


Fig. 15: Students At Risk of Leaving School Early Who Have Considered Quitting (by Percentage and Cultural Background)

sider leaving school are: "didn't feel like going", poor relationships with teachers, or work being too difficult. Students say they dislike school because of "time" requirements (i.e. having to get up in the morning, long hours, too many days). School rules, relationships with teachers, and "boring" are other reasons students give for disliking school.

As shown in Figure 16, there are a number of reasons students who are no longer in school give for quitting.

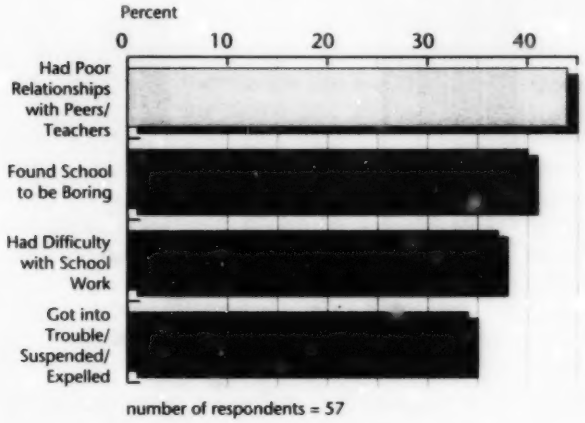


Fig. 16: The Main Reasons Students Who Are No Longer in School Give for Quitting (by Percentage)

Most students have experienced problems at school in the past year or in the year before they left school. The problems students most frequently experience at school are school work, relationships with teachers, and school rules (Table 3).

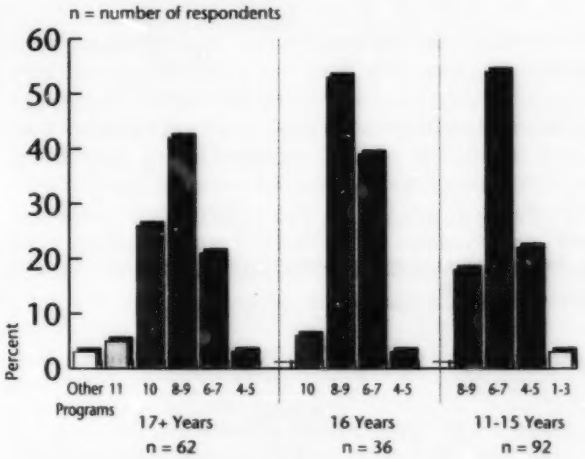
Table 3: Most Frequently Cited Problems Students Have Experienced at School in the Past Year by Cultural Background and Percentage of Students

	DENE/ METIS	INUIT/ INUVIALUIT	NON-ABORIGINAL	TOTAL
PROBLEMS RELATED TO:				
SCHOOL WORK	54%	61%	55%	54%
TEACHERS	43%	55%	70%	52%
SCHOOL RULES	47%	29%	55%	42%
HOME/FRIENDS	22%	23%	48%	28%
OTHER	9%	4%	3%	6%
HAD NO PROBLEMS	22%	23%	9%	20%
number of respondents	81	56	33	170

The Age and Grade of Students

Early school leavers and students at risk of leaving school early are likely to have failed a grade(s).

Virtually all of the students participating in this research started school at the age of 7 years or younger. This should put most 16 year old students in Grade 10 or 11. In fact, only 6% of the students 16 years of age and 31% of students 17 or more years of age report having achieved Grade 10 or 11 (Figure 17).



Note: Other indicates alternative programs

Fig. 17: Self-Reported Age and Last Grade/Class Completed (by Percentage of Students)

Yet students do not identify failing a grade(s) as a significant concern to them. At least once and as many as five times on two-thirds of the Cumulative Files, reference is made to the student repeating/failing/being retained in a grade. It is well documented in research done elsewhere in North America that poor academic achievement in school, as measured by grades, test scores and grade retention is associated with early school leaving.

For local education authorities and the general public the discussion about the age and grade of students is ongoing. Most commonly, the understanding of school practices and policies on passing and failing a grade(s) is confused. The opportunity exists for schools, education authorities and boards and divisional boards of education to communicate and discuss these practices and policies with parents and students.

School Instructional Program

Students at risk of leaving school early and those who have left school consistently find school work too hard or are getting behind in their school work.

Students indicate that difficulty with school work was the main problem experienced at school in the past year and is a reason for disliking school. However, students don't see specific courses as a factor contributing to early school leaving and few say that they are taking courses that seem to be irrelevant.

The school instructional program is an issue for local education authority and community members, and teaching staff. The concerns are numerous and link in part to a belief that education in the NWT is curriculum rather than needs based. The overall concepts and approaches (eg. mainstreaming, student-centred learning) used today in the education process are also a matter of discussion in NWT communities. While these approaches seem to be designed to break down barriers to good performance in school, it is clear from community discussions that:

- there is a lack of acceptance or understanding of these approaches,
- there is some opinion that schools may not have the staff with the necessary skills to implement these approaches, and
- systems to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of these approaches/methods may not have been put in place or may not have been communicated and/or understood.

Many of the concerns regarding the school instructional program are addressed in the Department of Education's 1991 document entitled *Our Students, Our Future: An Educational Framework*. The document explains that schooling should incorporate and be shaped by the culture and other circumstances of individual communities - schooling should be culture-based. Greater advocacy of this educational framework at the community level might serve to alleviate some of the present concerns.

Teaching Styles and Methods

Students at risk of leaving school early and early school leavers spend their time at school working by themselves at their desk or listening to teachers rather than working co-operatively in small groups.

Two-thirds or more of students say they spent most of their time at school this past year doing work by themselves at their desk and over half spent their time listening to teachers. Less than one-quarter of students spend their time at school learning or interacting with other students. There is little variation between the way in which students in the lower and those in higher grades spend their time at school (Figure 18).

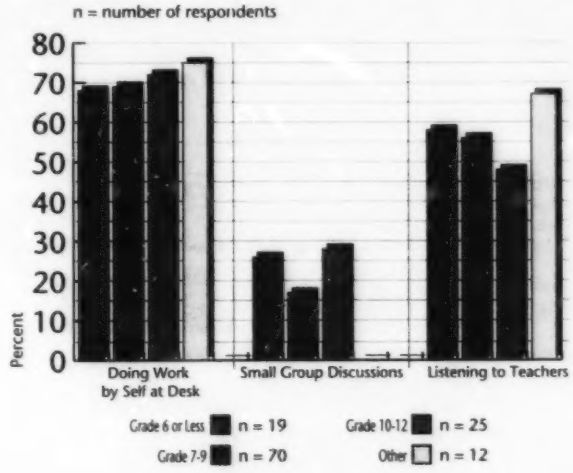


Fig. 18: How Students' Time Was Spent at School in the Past Year (Percentage of Students by Grade)

Community members and teaching staff say that teaching styles and methods are seen to be influenced by:

- teaching materials,
- teachers' skill levels,
- teacher turn-over,
- curriculum appropriateness,
- teacher appreciation of the "client group", and/or
- parent/community input into the education system.

Greater examination and discussion is required in NWT communities about teaching styles and methods. Recognition should be given to the use and importance of traditional or local learning processes, the desire of young people to be respected and recognized as individuals, and involving students in their own learning.

Academic Performance

Students at risk of leaving school early and early school leavers describe their performance in school as average or better than average. Cumulative Files and school staff indicate that these students are having difficulty using and/or speaking English.

Students (67%) at risk of leaving school early and those (62%) who have left in the last year describe their performance in school as average or better than others, and most of these students have always felt this way.

Up to 70% of Cumulative Files indicate that students are excelling in certain core subjects during some period of their schooling while at other times these same students are doing poorly in these same subjects. Over 60% of CUM Files have references to the student functioning below grade level.

Most (83%) students are exposed to English in the home. Most aboriginal students are also exposed to an aboriginal language in the home and are able to speak and understand the aboriginal language. While students themselves don't identify understanding of English as a problem for them at school, 40% of Cumulative Files contain a reference(s) to the student having trouble using and/or speaking English. Of these student files, 83% of the students indicate that an aboriginal language is their first language. These data may support the need for stronger first language and bilingual education programming.

Attendance

Students at risk of leaving school and early school leavers have poor attendance at school even though students say they are good attenders.

While almost two-thirds (65%) of students describe themselves as good attenders, only 13% say that they don't/didn't miss any school during an average week (Figure 19).

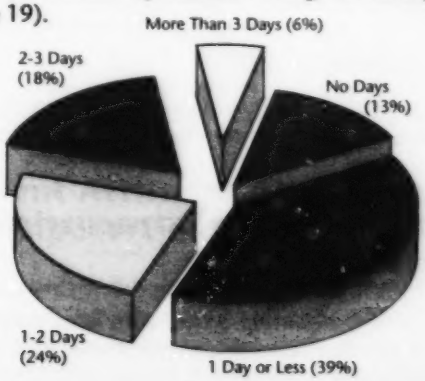


Fig. 19: Days of School Missed in an Average Week as Reported by Students (by Percentage)

There seems to be no stigma associated with missing school and poor/unclear responsibility for school attendance. Even though most (93%) parents/adults in the household are aware the student is missing school, most frequently nothing is done about the situation (Figure 20). "Sleeping in" is the main reason students miss school (Figure 21).

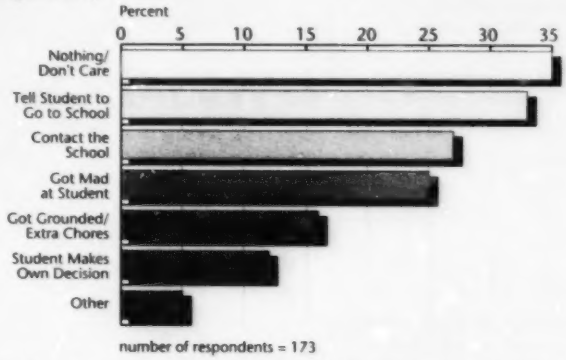


Fig. 20: Students' View of What Adults Do When Students Miss School (by Percentage)

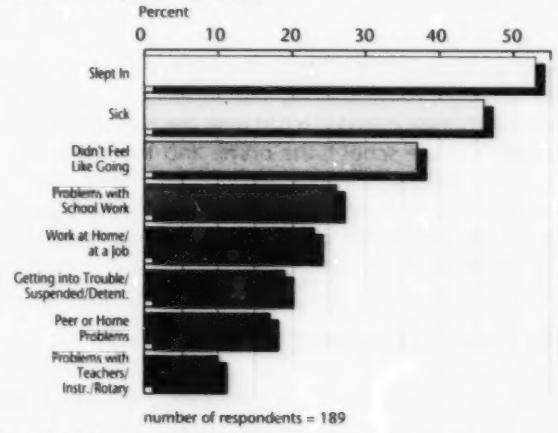


Fig. 21: Reasons Why Students Miss School (by Percentage of Students)

Making and Breaking School Rules

Students at risk of leaving school early and those who have recently left school have difficulty with school rules and disciplinary actions.

Students are more often involved in decision making and establishing the rules at school than in the home. Still, more than half (54%) of the students who left school in the last 12 months and a high proportion of students (39%) in school find/found school rules difficult to live with. Rules are one of the main reasons students don't like school (Table 4). Rules and such disciplinary actions as suspensions, expulsions and detentions are among the problems students experience most at school, and have contributed to students changing their attitude about school.

Table 4: What Students Don't Like About School by Percentage of Students and Age Group

	Age Group			
Things Students Don't Like About School (percentage)	**11-15**	**16**	**17+**	**Total**
Getting up in Morning/ Long hours/Too many days	65	61	56	61
Rules/Detentions/Too rigid	44	31	34	38
Boring	41	39	26	36
Teachers	30	31	34	32
Specific Subjects/Homework/ Exams	24	17	28	24
Unfriendly Place/Other Students/Uncomfortable	9	19	18	14
Don't Understand Language/ Have to speak English	7	17	8	9
Other	2	3	2	2
	n = 96	n = 36	n = 61	n = 193

n = number of respondents

Parents, educators, and local education authorities agree that it is very difficult to discipline students/young people. There is confusion and discord over the responsibility for discipline in the school, the home and the community. For most, communications among those three environments which most affect the behaviour of young people - the home, school and community - are poor and require improvement.

Student Support

Early school leavers seem to fade out of school rather than quit.

Among students who have left school in the last 12 months, less than half (44%) told the school that they were quitting, and of these less than half (44%) were aware of their schools doing anything to try to change their decision.

Cumulative Files seem to indicate that the school is more responsive to student needs. Over half (57%) of the CUM Files indicate a reference to a program or action designed to meet student needs (eg. tutorial, remedial, special needs/education classes/program, IEP program, homework program, mentorship program, and/or placement in an alternative program or other student support actions). Slightly less than half of the files have comments about referrals or extra help given to the student (eg. the School Team, IEP team, Special Needs Team, Interagency Team).

In discussions with school staff, few articulate specific actions which are taken to identify and assist at-risk students. This may in part be attributed to the fact that there is no Territorial-wide definition of a student-at-risk. Community members feel that schools are not meeting or cannot meet the needs of all of the students.

School-Home-Community Relations

Among students at risk of leaving school early and those who have recently left school, parental/guardian contact with the school is low.

Even though most students (80%) believe that their parents and/or adults in their household are helpful toward their education, over two-thirds (69%) of the students say their parents or other adults in their household never contact the school or only contact the school when requested (Figure 22). One third or less of the CUM Files refer to school contact with the home, home contact with the school, or give evidence of parent/guardian comments on the file.

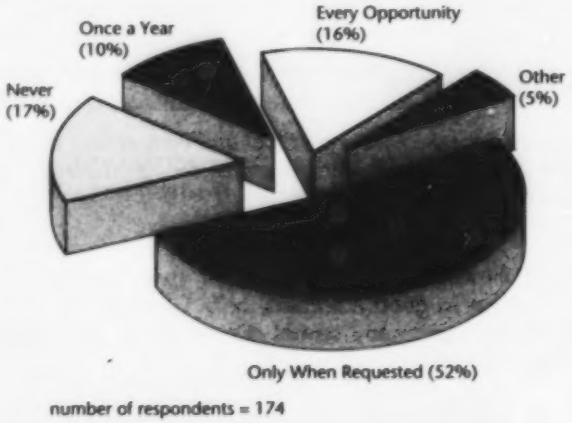


Fig. 22: Students' Perception of Adult and/or Parental Contact with the School in the Past Year (by Percentage)

School Sponsored Extracurricular Activities

Students at risk of leaving school early and early school leavers actively participate in school activities.

84% of students say that they participate(d) in special activities offered through the school. Sports and dances are the most popular of these activities. Information provided by NWT students seem to contradict other research into early school leaving which suggests that a lack of involvement in school activities is linked to early school leaving.

FACTORS IN THE PERSONAL LIVES OF STUDENTS

The Student...
- Uses Alcohol
- Has Been Exposed to Suicide
- Has Unrealistic Expectations for the Future
- Is Clear About the Value and Purpose of Education
- Has Strong / Influential Peer Relationships

Factors in the personal lives of students which may be associated with early school leaving are discussed below.

Student Attitudes About School and Expectations for the Future

NWT students at risk of leaving school early and those who have recently left school have high and perhaps unrealistic expectations for the future. They expect to achieve a high school education, work mainly in the service, transportation and health/medical industries, and support themselves and/or families with wage employment.

About 90% of students participating in the research believe that finishing high school is important to get a good job, have more choices, have a better life, be independent, and earn lots of money.

Students (96%) in small and large communities believe that if they complete Grade 12 they will be able to live the kind of life they want. 81% of students in large centres compared to 68% in small communities believe they can achieve Grade 12. Nearly all (93%) of students know the kind of work they would like to do in the future. They see themselves working in a variety of different occupations and economic sectors but jobs in the service, transportation and health/medical industries are preferred.

In the future, most students believe they will support themselves and their families by working full or part-time for wages.

Self Esteem

NWT students at risk of leaving school and those no longer in school report having positive self-esteem. Most view themselves or believe that other people see them as happy, friendly, able to get along with others, fun to be with, trustworthy and helpful.

About two-thirds of NWT students participating in the research would describe themselves as "happy" and "friendly" (Figure 23) and few would change anything about their personal lives.

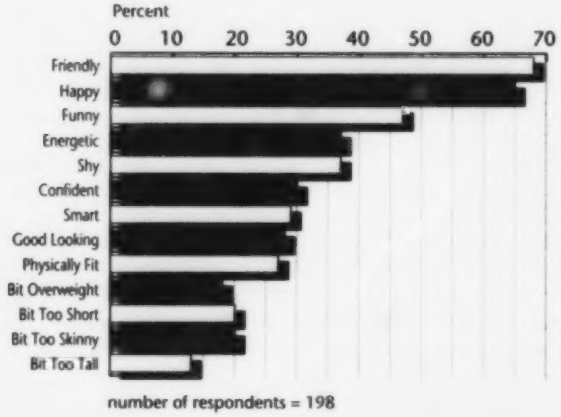


Fig. 23 : How Students Would Describe Themselves to Others (by Percentage)

Students describe themselves as having strong social and/or interpersonal skills (Figure 24). Two-thirds or more of students believe that most of their friends and peers see them as fun to be with, helpful, trustworthy, having time for them, dressing nicely and having a healthy physical appearance (Figure 25).

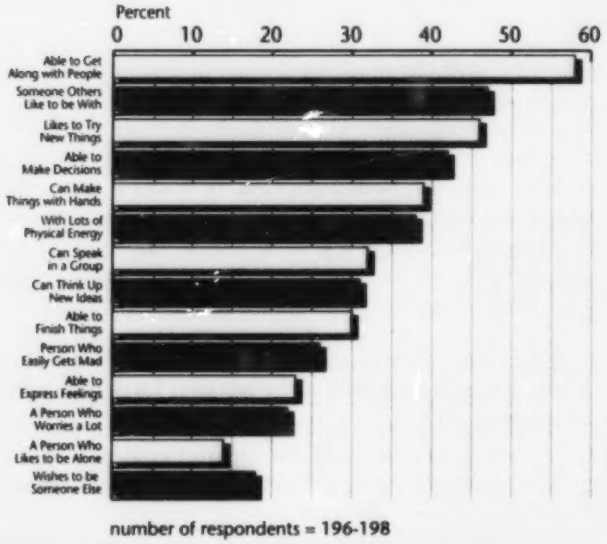


Fig. 24: How Students Mostly See Themselves (by Percentage)

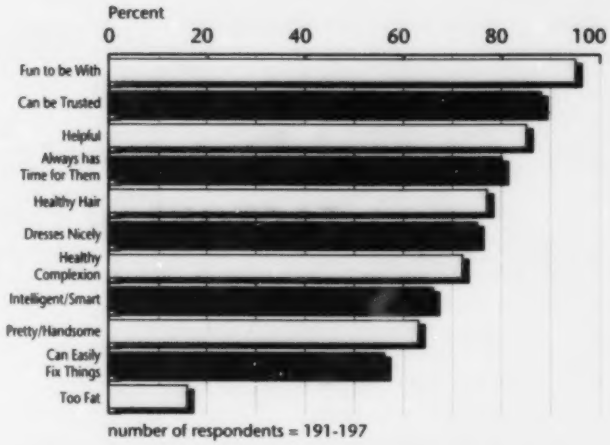


Fig. 25: How Students Think Most of Their Friends and People Their Own Age See Them (by Percentage)

While the generally positive view students have of themselves is reflected in Cumulative Files, it is not readily shared by community members, is inconsistent with other information rendered by students (i.e. with respect to problems at home, contemplation of suicide, or use of substances), and is not supported by other research which has been undertaken in the NWT. In a survey of health attitudes and behaviours (King et al., 1984), a high proportion of Grade 7's and 10's in the NWT indicated that they wished they were someone else and a low proportion said that they made friends easily.

Peer Relationships

Peer relationships are important to NWT students at risk of leaving school early and those who have recently left school. Peer relationships influence attitudes about school, how students see themselves, use of leisure time, and use of substances.

Students (69%) most frequently say they have one or no best friend but lots or some other friends. NWT students identify the effects of peer relationships in the school as both positive and negative. For example, seeing friends is the most attractive element about school but on the other hand, students who see their academic performance to be worse than others, have made this judgement to some extent because they are "always being picked on by other students". The participation of friends in extracurricular activities offered through the school also influences student decisions about participating in these activities.

Most NWT students interviewed have friends who go to school and friends who are no longer in school. Three-quarters of the students interviewed seem unconcerned about whether their friends go to school or have left school. 68% of students say that friends who are out of school encourage them to stay in school. However a significant portion of students suggest that friends who are out of school have less positive impacts on them (Figure 26).

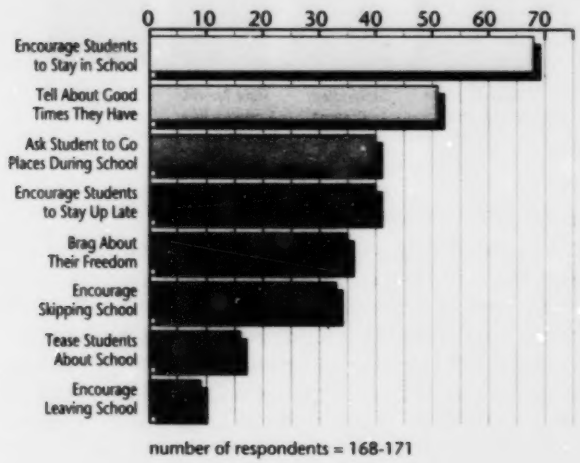


Fig. 26: Impact on Students of Friends Who Are Out of School (by Percentage)

Most (70%) students say they sometimes feel lonely and another 9% say they feel lonely often or all of the time. Peer relationships help students to deal with loneliness.

Leisure Time

Students at risk of leaving school early and those who have recently left school spend most of their leisure time with friends or watching television.

More than a third (37%) of students interviewed do not belong to any sports, cultural or recreational organizations in their community and 16% do not participate in special activities offered through the school. Students say they usually spend most of their free time with friends or watching TV/movies. If students had a choice as to how to spend their free time, students would not change the amount of time they spend with friends but a greater number would like to spend more of their leisure time with family and friends on the land, and/or with their grandparents, and less time watching TV, and playing video games at the arcade.

Use of Alcohol, Drugs and Solvents

Among NWT students at risk of leaving school early and those who have recently left school, alcohol is frequently used. Students seem unclear about what impact this has on their schooling.

Half of the students interviewed say that they have not used alcohol in the past 12 months and 43% say they never use alcohol (Figure 27). Most students who use alcohol tend to drink with friends rather than with family members or other people in the community. Almost two-thirds of the students (64%) who drink say they drink to get high, have fun or have a good time.

NWT students indicate that patterns of drug and solvent use are different than those for alcohol use. 91% of students say they never use solvents or haven't used them in the last 12 months (Figure 27). About two-thirds (67%) say they never use drugs or haven't used drugs in the last 12 months (Figure 27). Like alcohol, students most frequently use drugs and solvents with friends but there is a greater tendency to use these substances by oneself. The motivation to use drugs is similar to alcohol - students use drugs to get high, have fun or have a good time. Students who sniff are more likely to do so because "there is nothing else to do".

Students do not suggest that the use of drugs, alcohol or sniffing solvents causes them to miss school, change their attitude towards school, get behind in their work, or think about quitting/quit school. Still, in questions asked about the home, half of the students say that their use or another household member's use of these substances has had a negative affect on their schooling.

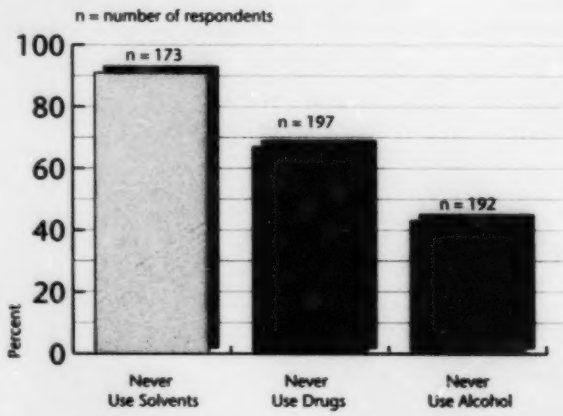


Fig. 27: Non-Use of Alcohol, Drugs and Solvents (by Percentage of Students)

Suicide

Suicide is prevalent in the lives of early school leavers and students at risk of leaving school early.

44% of students say they have tried or thought about committing suicide (Figure 28). Difficulty dealing with problems in general or family problems in particular are the main reasons for attempts/contemplation of suicide. A significant portion of students (87%) interviewed have known someone who has committed or tried to commit suicide (Figure 28), and the incidence varies little between students in large and small communities.

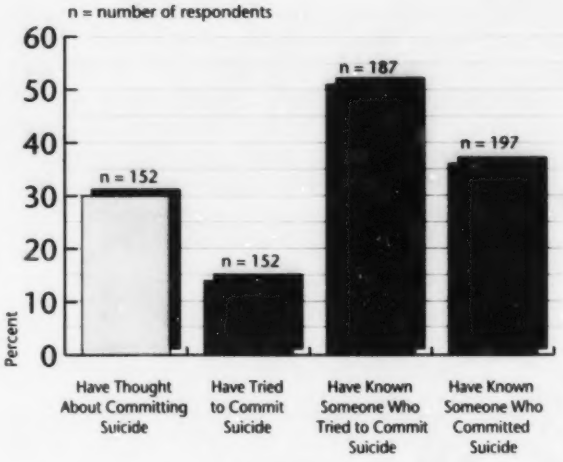


Fig. 28: Students' Experience with Suicide (by Percentage)

THE OPINIONS OF HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES

The collection of some baseline data on the opinions of students at risk of leaving school early and those who have already left school early allows for the comparison of their views with those of other groups including high school graduates. The Department of Education (1989) surveyed students enrolled in Grade 12 then conducted a follow-up survey with the same students one year following their graduation. Table 5 compares the views about education of NWT high school graduates and early school leavers/ students at risk of leaving school early.

Table 5: Comparison of the Opinions of NWT Early School Leavers/Students at Risk of Leaving School Early and High School Graduates

	Graduates	At Risk/ Early School Leavers
High Value and Importance Given to Education	Agree	Agree
Concern About Courses Available	Agree	Disagree
Education Prepares Them For the Future	Agree	Agree
One-third of Students Believe School is Boring	Agree	Agree
Rather go to School than to a Job	Agree	Agree
Older Students are More Dissatisfied with School Rules	Agree	Disagree

Note: This table summarizes the results of similar questions asked in this research and in the Department of Education's graduate survey.

SUMMARY

The research identified several factors in all aspects of the students' lives which contribute to early school leaving in the Northwest Territories. These are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6: Key Factors Contributing to Early School Leaving in the NWT

Community Factors

- Students are uncertain about the quality of community life.
- Students are uncertain about their own future in their communities.
- Communities are dissatisfied with/uncertain about their input into and control of education.
- Students are clear about the value and purpose of education.
- Communities are unclear about the value and purpose of education.
- There is insufficient community support for education.

Home Factors

- Students live in average or larger than average sized households.
- Students' households have poor economic circumstances.
- Students have to work at home.
- Wage employment is sometimes more important than school.
- Students don't participate in household decision making.
- Students don't expect discipline at home.
- Students live in troubled home environments (eg. abuse, neglect, substance abuse).
- Parental/guardian contact with the school is low.

School Factors

- Students have problems with school work, teachers and school rules.
- Students have likely failed a grade(s).
- Students spend their time at school working at their desk or listening to teachers rather than working co-operatively in small groups or with other students.
- Students are poor attenders.
- Students seem to fade out of school rather than quit.
- Parental/guardian contact with the school is low.

Personal Factors

- Students have high and perhaps unrealistic expectations for the future.
- Students are influenced by peer relationships.
- Students use alcohol.
- Suicide is prevalent in the lives of students.

As found in other research the interplay of many factors, rather than one or a few specific factors, likely cause students to "fade out" of the education system over a long period of time. The challenge facing all partners in education is to examine their own roles and responsibilities for education in light of the implications of this research. The expressed views and experiences of students who have recently left school in the NWT and those who appear to be at risk of leaving school early, do not always agree with the opinions of other education partners. Nevertheless this report should provide "lessons for all".

More discussion about these factors and other research findings are available in Volume 2: Summary Report and Volume 3: Technical Report.

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